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The *Book of the Prince and the Ascetic* and the transmission of wisdom

Constanza Cordoni



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THE BOOK OF THE PRINCE AND THE ASCETIC AND THE TRANSMISSION OF WISDOM

INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew *Sefer ben ha-melekh we-ha-nazir* or *Book of the Prince and the Ascetic*¹ can be considered as an adaptation or maybe as the creative translation of an Arabic text belonging to the tradition of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat². The actual manuscript used as a source by its

- 1 Several other translations have been suggested for the original title *Sefer ben ha-melekh we-ha-nazir* – among others *Le Fils du Roi et l'Ascète* (D. Gimaret, *Le Livre de Bilawhar et Būdāsf selon la version arabe ismaélienne*, Geneva, Droz, 1971, p. 47), *Le Livre du roi et de l'ermite* (J. Sadan, “Le mort qui confessa ses méfaits au vivant: Fables enchâssées entre l'arabe et l'hébreu dans *Barlaam et Josaphat*”, *D'Orient en Occident: les recueils de fables enchâssées avant les Mille et une nuits de Galland* (Barlaam et Josaphat, *Disciplina clericalis*, Calila et Dimna, *Roman des Sept Sages*), ed. M. Uhlig and Y. Foehr-Janssens, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, p. 231-258), *The Prince and the hermit* (S. L. Albert, “The Hebrew *Barlaam and Joasaph*: An experiment in Jewish *adab*?”, ed. F. Bauden, A. Chraïbi, A. Ghersetti, *Le Répertoire narratif arabe médiéval, transmission et ouverture. Actes du Colloque international (Liège, 15-17 septembre 2005)*, Geneva, Droz, 2008, p. 273-285), *Prinz und Derwisch* (the title of Alois Meisel's translation into German – *Prinz und Derwisch oder die Makamen Ibn Chisdais*, W. A. Meisel [transl.], 2. ed., Pest, Herz, 1860 –, also used by Nathan Weisslovits in *Prinz und Derwisch: Ein indischer Roman enthaltend die Jugendgeschichte Buddha's in hebräischer Darstellung (des Abraham ibn Chisdai) aus dem Mittelalter nebst einer Vergleichung der arabischen und griechischen Paralleltexzte. Mit einem Anhang von Dr. Fritz Hommel*, München, Ackermann, 1890), *El Príncep i el monjo* (Tessa Calders' Catalan title: T. Calders i Artís, *El Príncep i el monjo, d'Avrahām ha-Lēwī Ben Šemū'el Ibn-Hasdāy*, Ausa, Sabadell, 1987).
- 2 For an overview on the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* in particular see art. “Ben Ha-Melekh Ve-Ha-Nazir”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. ed. M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik, 2nd ed. Vol. 3. Detroit, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 351; G. Tamani, “La tradizione ebraica della leggenda di Barlaam e Iosafat”, *Il viaggio dei testi. III Coloquio Internazionale Medioevo Romanzo e Orientale Venezia, 10-13 ottobre 1996*, ed. A. Pioletti, Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro), Rubettino, 1999, p. 393-400; A. Schippers, “The Hebrew Maqama”, Chapter 8 of J. Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama. A History of a Genre*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2002, p. 302-327.

author, Abraham Ibn Hisday, has not yet been identified, but it is clear that the work that has come down to us is no direct translation of any of the extant Arabic precursors of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat¹, the diverse pre-barlaamic² texts here collectively referred to as *Kitab Bilawhar wa-Budasf*³. This article will look at the text as it stands. I will first present a description of the work (II.), complemented with an appendix which provides an overview of the parable corpus. In a second part (III.), I will focus on a group of both diegetic and metadiegetic passages dealing with the transmission of wisdom, probably the most representative aspect of the “job description” of the ascetic, but also of advisors in general, and probably one of the main subjects of the work.

OVERVIEW: STRUCTURE, PARABLES, NARRATIVE INSTANCES AND MAQAMA-STYLE

Within the specific context of the enormously popular textual tradition of Barlaam and Josaphat, the Hebrew *Sefer ben ha-melekh we-ba-nazir*, written in Barcelona in the thirteenth century, is the first non-Christian text composed on European soil. The number of manuscripts conserving it seems to attest its popularity⁴. In common with the Arabic texts to

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- 1 On the Greek text of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat and its reception in the Latin and vernacular literature of the Middle Ages see R. Volk, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*. Bd. VI/1: *Historia animae utilis de Barlaam et Ioasaph (spuria)*, Einführung, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 2009; J. Sonet, *Le Roman de Barlaam et Josaphat*, Namur, Bibl. de l'Université, 1949-1952, 3 vols.; H. Peri, *Der Religionsdisput der Barlaamlegende. Ein Motiv abendländischer Dichtung*, Salamanca, Univ. de Salamanca, 1959. See also article ‘Barlaam and Josaphat’, *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, 10 vols., Stuttgart, Metzler, [1977]-1999, vol. 1, cols. 1464-1469; C. Cordoni, *Barlaam und Josaphat in der europäischen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 2014, and *Barlaam und Josaphat: Neue Perspektiven auf ein europäisches Phänomen*, ed. M. Meyer and C. Cordoni, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter (to be published in 2015).
 - 2 I borrow this expression from Daniel Gimaret's introduction to his French translation of the *Kitab Bilawhar wa-Budasf* where he presents a number of Oriental texts as being “versions pré-barlamiennes”. D. Gimaret, *Le Livre*, p. 25.
 - 3 On a number of occasions I'll be referring in the following pages to one of these sources, the so-called *Ismaili Kitab Bilawhar wa-Budasf*, as *Kitab Bilawhar* or the *Ismaili* version.
 - 4 The online catalogue of the National Library of Israel lists following manuscripts as containing the *Sefer ben-ha-melekh*: Amsterdam, M. H. Gans Samml., 25 (1590),

which its source seems to have belonged, the Hebrew *Sefer ben ha-melekh* is not as explicit as the Christian texts about the religion it advocates. The latter contain plenty of references to the life of Jesus, to the Gospels, and even make use of the Christian Apology of Aristides of Athens (second cent. A.D.), a disputation in which a defender of Christianity defeats the religions of the Chaldeans, Greeks, and Egyptians.

The *Sefer ben ha-melekh* consists of 35 chapters or gates (*she'arim*), the first 31 of which are written in *maqama*-style, i. e. rhymed prose alternating with verse¹; the last three chapters differ from the preceding in form – they are written in unrhymed prose – as well as in content – they

Budapest, Magyar tudományos akademia, Kaufmann 528 (1358), Cambridge, Univ. Libr., Add. 507,2 (fifteenth-sixteenth cent.), Cambridge, Trinity College, R 8 23 (sixteenth cent.), Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College, 308 (sixteenth cent.), Firenze, Bibl. Medicea Laurent., Plut. I.19 (fifteenth-sixteenth cent.), Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibl., Levy 108 (eighteenth-nineteenth cent.), Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, 21.51.180 (fourteenth cent.), Jerusalem, Ha-Rav Sassoon, Ha-Pisga, Sassoon Samml., 695, (seventeenth cent.), Jerusalem, Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 5386 (nineteenth cent.), London, Brit. Libr., Or. 1485 (fourteenth-fifteenth cent.), London, Montefiori Library, 277 (seventeenth-eighteenth cent.), Moskow, Staatsbibl., Guinzburg 273 (1465), Moskow, Staatsbibl., Guinzburg 166 (1433), Moskow, Staatsbibl., Guinzburg 338 (fifteenth cent.), New York, Jew. Theol. Sem., 1509 (1727), New York, Jew. Theol. Sem., 1499 (s.a), New York, Manfred and Anne Lehmann Foundation, D 134 (Fragment) (seventeenth cent.), Nürnberg, Stadtbibl., Cent. S. App. 35 (s. a.), Oxford, Bodl. Libr., Hunt 225 (14th – 15th cent.), Paris, Bibl. Nat., Hebr. 775 (fourteenth-fifteenth cent.), Paris, Bibl. Nat., Hebr. 1283 (1423), Parma, Bibl. Palat., Parm. 2486 (1319), Parma, Bibl. Palat., Parm. 3025 (fourteenth cent.), Parma, Bibl. Palat., Parm. 2461 (fourteenth-fifteenth cent.), Parma, Bibl. Palat., Parm. 2297 (fourteenth cent.), Rochester, Abraham Karp [56] (fragment) (s. a.), Rom, Bibl. Casanatense, 3126 (fourteenth cent.), St. Petersburg, Russ. Nationalbibl., Evr. II.A.544 (fragment) (fifteenth cent.), Tel Aviv, Shaar-Zion Library at Beit Ariela, 1 (1739). Numerous are also the *Sefer's* early prints which comprise Constantinople 1518, Mantua 1557, Wandsbek 1727, Frankfurt an der Oder 1766, 1791, Offenbach und Fürth 1783, Zhovkva 1795, Livorno 1831, Zhytomyr 1850, 1873 u. 1877, Lviv 1870, Warsaw 1870, 1884, 1889, 1894, 1902, 1922, (after) 1925, Jerusalem 1907. See: Calders, *El Princep i el monjo*, p. 59-60 and Tamani, "La tradizione ebraica", p. 396-397. The online catalogue Israel Union List lists 20 editions for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

- 1 Arie Schippers, "The Hebrew Maqama", points out that "in Hebrew literature, other stories and narrative pieces in rhymed prose began to be called maqamas even though they did not follow the scheme of the Arabic classical maqama of al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī." (p. 302). Actually, he points out that "all narrative rhymed prose in Hebrew" is called maqama. Furthermore, he observes that the structure of the story of the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* "has nothing to do with the usual picaresque maqama narrative." (p. 315). Albert, "The Hebrew Barlaam", observes that "[w]e can't know if the Arabic source for Ibn Hasdai's work was written as a maqāma since it is no longer extant. Even if it was, Ibn Hasdai was clearly up to the task of composing original material, as his introduction eloquently shows." (p. 280).

read like short tractates on topics such as the immortality of the soul or the four elements. They could be Ibn Hisday's own addition to his source or have belonged to the Arabic text¹ he transposes into Hebrew, but they have no parallel in the extant Arabic versions. The main text is preceded by a foreword by Ibn Hisday, a second foreword attributed to the translator from a Greek ur-source into Arabic and an introduction to the text by the alleged Greek composer², setting the action in a kingdom in the region of India and depicting, above all, its idolatrous and power addicted king. The first and third of these forewords are written, like the 31 first chapters of the main text, in *maqama*-style. It should be noted that this extensive *forewording* is an unknown feature in the text tradition of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend. Neither the short nor the long versions know so much *paratext* preceding the main text. Furthermore, the Hebrew version contains whole chapters dealing with subjects – obligations of children toward their parents, duties of a prince etc. – which have no parallel in the extant Arabic *Kitab Bilawhar*³ or the Western Barlaam and Josaphat tradition.

With the exception of the first seven gates, which consist mainly of shorter dialogues, the text is basically a long dialogue between a nameless ascetic (*nazir*)⁴ and the likewise nameless king's son⁵. The namelessness of the characters distinguishes the Hebrew work from the Arabic extant texts as well as from the Western texts of the Barlaam and Josaphat tradition where the king, his son, the teacher, and some other characters have proper names. The setting of the plot is also identified by precise naming⁶.

1 If the second foreword to Ibn Hisday's work, that of the translator from the Greek into Arabic is authentic, then the last chapters are probably not Ibn Hisday's addition, for they are listed in this foreword. Throughout this article reference is made to the edition of the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* by A. M. Haberman, Tel Aviv, 1950. Translations are also based on this text.

2 Albert, "The Hebrew Barlaam", points out that Ibn Hisday's work "fits more closely with versions that have not passed through Greek" (p. 279). In the Barlaam and Josaphat scholarship it is widely accepted that the direction of transmission was Arabic – Georgian – Greek.

3 See: Gimaret, *Le Livre*, p. 48.

4 I would refrain from using the term "monk" since this word is more generally used to denote the Christian and Buddhist member of a monastic community.

5 This dialogue is interrupted twice when the ascetic retires to let the prince reflect on what has been discussed. The first break takes place in chapter 18, the second in chapter 29.

6 Albert, "The Hebrew Barlaam", p. 281, points out that the work's "failure to name the prince and his hermit-teacher is particularly interesting considering that in the

Unlike the Greek version, the corpus of embedded tales in the Hebrew adaptation is not entirely contained in the dialogue between the prince and the ascetic¹: the first three are told by the extradiegetic narrator², by the king and by the prince (intradiegetic narrators) before the dialogue with the ascetic begins in chapter 8. A tendency towards a “democratization” of the telling of parables can be identified in the Hebrew *Sefer*, which probably goes back to its Arabic source³. Whereas the majority of the parables are told by the master ascetic (as we might call one of the two protagonists of the work), some are told later on in the text by characters of metadiegetic narratives (see appendix).

The parable corpus and its order is the main subject of the very short second preface, the one attributed to the author of Ibn Hisday’s Arabic source, the supposed translator of a Greek source into Arabic⁴. The proper applicability of the parables is evidently a crucial aspect of the translator’s understanding of his own task in transmitting the text.

Now when we come to the bulk of the parables, i. e. those in the main dialogue, we note that they are quite varied in length and content and are introduced in a number of different ways. Some have a single introductory formula, such as “You should know that...”, “the sages

many explanations for the names Barlaam and Joasaph and the many variants of each, Hebraicization has been considered a significant step in their reaching their most common forms. Whether Ibn Hasdai was working from a version without names or actively chose to remove names, having a generic prince and hermit as the protagonists definitely adds universality to the story.”

- 1 To be precise, in the Greek-Byzantine version the last story, that of the women as devils, is not contained in the main dialogue between Barlaam and Josaphat, but in another one between the prince’s father, Abenner, and the magician Theudas.
- 2 Here and in the following pages I will be using Gérard Genette’s terminology in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1980 [Orig. “Récit du discours”, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 65-282]. The main narrator is therefore referred to as *extradiegetic narrator*, his discourse is the narrated world, the *diegesis*. Within this world there can be characters who act as narrators (*intradiegetic narrators*), whose narratives, i. e. narratives on the second narrative level, are called *metadiegetic narratives*. These can also, and I do this in this article, be referred to with the older terms of *embedded narrative* or *parable*. Expanding Genette’s terminology it could be said that we have to do with a third narrative level and an *intra-intradiegetic narrator* respectively with a *meta-metadiegetic narrative* when characters of second-level narratives become narrators.
- 3 In the Arabic Ismaili version tales are told by the master, Bilawhar, but also by the king, by Budasf himself as well as by characters within narratives told by intradiegetic narrators.
- 4 The title of this preface refers to its author as “the foreword of the Arabic translator”. It should be noted that *ba-ma’atīq* can be literally translated as “the copyist”.

said..." or "as the ancient remembered..."; others are introduced by what I term a "double introduction" consisting of a sort of teaser by the nazir connecting the parable to the topic being discussed and providing thereby an anticipatory interpretation of the parable – "as happened to X"; to this teaser the prince generally replies with the question, "And how was that?", prompting the second part of the introduction – "They told that..." and the narrative proper.

Regarding their application they are also quite varied. Some are preceded by an anticipatory interpretation, while others are followed by an allegorical one. Some others, on the other hand, have an allegorical interpretation interwoven with the narrative itself. A group of tales are not explicitly interpreted at all.

Stories are told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic, but also by a metadiegetic narrator (see: The King and his Vizier among others). A group of stories is explicitly introduced as going back to the sages. We seem to have to do with a type we do not find anywhere else in the Barlaam and Josaphat tradition, and which I designate in the appendix as "sages micro-story" but which could also be termed "sages pseudo-narrative", i. e. a very short passage, which has a narrative opening such as "A sage once said to..." or "They asked a sage once...", but which consists mainly of a saying¹.

The most salient stylistic feature of the Hebrew text is definitely its tendency towards the repetition in verse of what has been stated immediately before in rhymed prose. In general, the prose passage quotes a saying of "the sages" – or of a single sage, introduced with the formulae "the sages said" respectively "the sage said"². The introductory formula for a *story* that goes back to the sages is "the sages recalled",

1 The same use of stories and sayings is found in the Latin *Disciplina clericalis* of Petrus Alphonsi. I thank Yasmina Foehr-Janssens for this indication (personal communication).

2 The sayings in prose following a first one introduced with "the sages said..." or "the sage said..." are introduced with "and furthermore they said..." respectively "and another said...". Quite seldom are other introductory formulae for prose sayings, such as "the teller of parables said" or "the tellers of parables said". With "the sages" Ibn Hisday does not refer to the collective anonymous authority of rabbinic Judaism as one would probably expect from a Jewish author, but it is likely that many of these sayings were also in his Arabic source. See: Gimaret, *Le Livre*, p. 49: "Qu'en est-il maintenant des innombrables sentences de Sages qui émaillent le texte? Elles sont très probablement d'origine arabe, et doivent sans doute beaucoup aux *Adâb al-falâsifa* de Hunayn b. Ishâq, connus des Juifs d'Espagne dès le XI^e siècle, ainsi qu'à d'autres livres d'*adab* comme *Kalîla wa Dimna*." He further refers to Nathan Weisslovits who suggested that among Ibn Hisday's sources was the *Mibhar*

but also “the sages told that”. The teaching contained in the quotation, be this a saying or a sages micro-story, is generally repeated in verses attributed to a poet that follow it. The poet, who remains anonymous like the rest of the *personae* in the work, is referred to as *the* poet in the formula introducing his words, “And the poet says...”.¹ These “units” of sages’ saying and poet’s verse can be seen as a specific sort of embedded material which can but need not be of narrative character.

It should be noted that quoting the sages and the poet on the one hand, and speaking in verse on the other are not exclusive of the extradiegetic narrator, but characters such as the prince, the nazir (both in his direct speech and within the tales he tells²), the decrepit men the prince sees on the streets, as well as characters within the metadiegetic stories (even the bird in *The Gardener and the Bird*) also do this. When they speak in their own poetic words, these are introduced with special formulae, other than “the poet said”³.

The regular alternation of prose and verse is present in every single chapter and even in the two lengthier forewords. Sharon L. Albert commented upon the intended audience of the work that “only a small elite would have been able to follow this complex form, particularly when read aloud.”⁴

As mentioned before, also the characters within tales told by the characters, i. e. metadiegetic characters, quote the sages and the poet. This is the case for example in the story of *The Messenger of Death* and

ba-penim, a collection attributed to Ibn Gabirol and written in Arabic, which, however “ne fait que reproduire une littérature sapientielle d’origine arabe” (*ibid.*, n. 97).

- 1 On one occasion “the poets” are quoted as source (p. 121).
- 2 E. g. in the parable of the sower he interprets the fate of the seed in the different soil types with the words of the poet, thus expanding the parable with four verse passages.
- 3 E. g. “and he replied and sang”, “and he took up his parable”, “and he took up his parable and said”, “and the ascetic opened his mouth and said” etc.
- 4 Albert, “The Hebrew Barlaam”, p. 283. Considering that this way of repetitive wordplay thus pervades the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* and could be one of its most characteristic features, it is striking that its translator into German verse, Alois Meisel, chose in several occasions to omit one of the parts, generally the prose part preceding the verses. So on page 296 we read, “Die Prosa besagt ganz dasselbe, und blieb deshalb fort.” He also unifies the words of the sages and those of the poet by introducing passages as being uttered by both at the same time, “Des Weisen und des Dichters Wort” (*ibid.*). Meisel excludes parts of the original text on quite arbitrary grounds. On p. 162, footnote we read, for example, “Die hier im Texte folgende Anekdote mußte der Ästhetik weichen.” [The anecdote which followed in the original text had to be removed due to aesthetic considerations.] The anecdote is the tale of the woman and the doll.

The Four Caskets, where in one and the same story the blasphemers of the king (p. 74-75), the king's brother (p. 75), and the king (p. 76-78) himself speak with words of others¹. After having the golden caskets opened the king quotes the sages who in their turn tell a short parable containing itself a saying of a sage.

These examples are illustrative of how the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* opts at the same time both for multiple narrative levels and for a blurring of their limits with an oft-recurring stylistic feature (a sort of metalepsis, if we take this term in its broad meaning of breaching the limits of narrative levels), consisting of a "democratization" of the telling of parables, the quoting of sages and the poet, and speaking in verse.

THE ASCETIC'S JOB OR WHY A MONKEY CANNOT BE A BARBER

The ascetic went his way to fulfil his work and his need. He left the prince crying and in low spirits, moaning and groaning, sighing and panting, despondent but troubled, for many days. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 211)

With these words the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* comes to an end. The ascetic goes on with his work somewhere else and the prince is left wiser than he was before they met but he has not become an ascetic nor has he converted to any religion. On the contrary he has been reassured in his role as worldly ruler of the land his father governs at the narrated time and he seems to have accepted his fate. This aspect of Ibn Hisday's rendition of the story contrasts sharply with the basic fable of Barlaam and Josaphat, where the former's task is only fulfilled when his disciple follows him in the desert of Sennaar, where he leads the life of a hermit just as his master does.

Ibn Hisday's text is, apart from a couple of stories dealing with Joseph and David, practically devoid of religious references. There is no

1 The king makes use of words of the sages and the poet three times. In the two first cases no words of the sages are quoted, but only poetic words said by the king and introduced in the first case with "and he took up his parable and said". Incidentally, this verse passage marks the end of the first part of the story, The Messenger of Death, known in the tradition of Barlaam and Josaphat as The Trumpet of Death, and the beginning of the second part, The Four Caskets.

explicit theology, open quoting of the Bible or of rabbinic authorities, no reference to liturgy nor to other Jewish religious practices. Sharon L. Albert points out that Ibn Hisdai addresses a Jewish audience mainly by writing in Hebrew and that it is only at the end of the text that we find a “nod” at the Hebrew-speaking community for whom he intended his translation:

the last prose line of the story, following the prince’s show of distress, reads, “God in his great mercy will gather and restore to the gate of Bat-Rabim *Judah* and *Israel* as friends”. [...] Taken as whole, the reference to Judah and Israel followed by the verse might easily be read as an attempt to frame the whole story in terms of Jewish suffering and salvation¹.

As Tessa Calders meticulously documented, however, the text *is* full of addresses directed at those among the Jewish community capable of discerning the many hidden quotations of the Bible in the text². At the same time the prolific use of biblical quotations can be seen as a distinguishing literary device not exclusive of Hebrew prose.

A second hypothesis Albert proposes, which concerns the lack of names in the text, seems to contradict that of the story as allusion to Jewish suffering and salvation, but might be more applicable since it is more evidently supported by the text. According to this hypothesis the work was conceived as a universalistic version of the specifically religious Bilawhar-Barlaam stories:

Whether Ibn Hasdai was working from a version without names or actively chose to remove names, having a generic prince and hermit as the protagonists, definitely adds universality to the story. Setting up the characters as general types enhances the lack of specific religious reference at any point in the story³.

If the ascetic’s motivation when he sets out to teach the prince is not to teach him religious dogmata in order to convert him – we should bear in mind that proselytation is a very problematic issue in Judaism – nor to turn him into an ascetic, what is his target precisely?

1 Albert, “The Hebrew Barlaam”, p. 280-281.

2 See Calders, *El Príncipe*, p. 241-256.

3 Albert, “The Hebrew Barlaam”, p. 281. As Albert rightly observes, Ibn Hisday’s refraining from praising God at the beginning of his foreword, as was usual in Jewish and Muslim literature at the time (the foreword by the translator into Arabic does contain such an opening), points to this universalistic tendency of the Hebrew adaptation. See: p. 281.

I propose to analyse a number of passages of the diegesis as well as metadiegetic narratives in order to illustrate how the text depicts the job of the ascetic and comparable characters whose function is mainly to transmit wisdom¹.

THE FIRST ASCETIC (CHAPTERS 1-3)

The introduction by the author and the first three chapters constitute a sort of preamble to the main story. The introduction provides the setting for the story: the nameless king of a country in India is depicted as a young arrogant despot, prone to a hedonistic way of life and as an oppressor of the “dear religion and righteous faith” (p. 15) which had spread before he began to rule in ancient times. The introduction is closed with a depiction of the excesses of the king and his retinue, banquets with food, drink, women and sacrifices to the idols said to be those of Sidonians and Hittites².

Before the prince is born, anticipating the dialogic situation of the text, the king engages in a conversation with one of his close advisors, who has opted for an ascetic way of life. This first ascetic who comes on the scene in chapter 1 is referred to as *nazir*. In Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew the term refers to the man or woman who, according to Num 6:1-21 and Judg 13:5,7, is “bound by a vow to be set apart for the service of God, and as such to abstain from grapes and all productions of the vine and from intoxicating drinks, and to let his hair grow.”³ Even though Naziriteship was put an end to after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., Mishnah tractate Nozir and its commentary in both Talmuds discuss the assumption of the vow, the duties of the Nazirite, breaches of the vow, etc.

Against his will this first ascetic makes his appearance on the diegetic level: the king asks his advisors after a certain man not present at court whose counsel he particularly appreciates and is told that he has

1 His role and that of the prince seem to constitute opposites in this work: teaching wisdom or learning it. Seen from this angle, the choice of the title does not seem casual: the characters are referred to by their function so that the focus is kept on the contrast they impersonate.

2 See: 1 Kings 11:1 where the list of the foreign women Solomon loved includes precisely Sidonians and Hittites.

3 M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, Leipzig-London-New York, Luzac-Putnam's Sons, 1903, p. 891.

joined the ascetics and their faith, that he ploughs the field and leads an unblemished life (p. 17). Enraged the king sends his men to look for the ascetic who is found living in a cave in the forest, among beasts, his bed consisting of "thorns and snares" (Prov 22:5), his food on straw. Once they have brought him before the king, the latter, infuriated on seeing him dressed in a woollen robe¹ in the manner of ascetics, interrogates him after the grounds for this life change. The king explains his anger arguing that everyone who inflicts himself unnecessary pain ultimately contributes to the diminution of his people. Therefore, he attempts to prevent anyone from taking up the ascetics' way of life. The king even accuses his former friend of being suicidal (p. 19). The ascetic declares his willingness to explain his motives on the condition that the king put his wrath aside and let his "intelligence and understanding" be the judges. The king consents to this judicial setting and poses questions which are answered in chapters 2 and 3. What is the truth the man has found? When has taken place? Who has led him to it? Frequently quoting "the sages" and "the poet" the man comprehensively exposes his understanding of his way of life as the right one. His account includes a lengthy digression on medicine. The target of this talk is not reached, it fails to bring the king to realize that the choice met by the ascetic is right and that he has harmed no one thereby. The king, as furious as before, is not willing to take the man seriously and accuses him of being a liar, before they part.

THE WORD FLICKER

Another episode dealing less explicitly with an ascetic is that of The Word Flicker in chapter 5 (p. 39-53). On a certain day, as the king goes hunting, a minister of his who is part of the retinue sees a man wandering "where there is no pasture" and addresses him as "tortured man" asking him who he is. After the man rather enigmatically defines himself using a series of metaphorical expressions, the minister realizes

1 This is what the Hebrew text reads. A. Meisel, *Prinz und Derwisch*, justifies his translation which describes the man as "covered with hair as a bear" (p. 22) with the following commentary: "Die Derwische tragen selten Tuch; dagegen meistens schwarzes oder weißes Abba, eine Art sehr groben Kamelots, der in verschiedenen Städten Anatoliens gefertigt wird. Die Kadri tragen auch Stiefel und Turban von schwarzen Abba. Alle lassen sich Bart und Schnurrbart wachsen; mehrere Orden lassen auch Haupthaar lang wachsen, zum Andenken dessen, was der Prophet selbst that" (*ibid.*, footnote).

that the man is of the “children of the discipline”, who has learned out of the books of proverbs and metaphors; he wonders how, in spite of this knowledge, the man has not earned himself a place in a king’s palace. The wanderer replies that “the merciful father” will protect the minister, for he is a faithful man, and furthermore, that he rewards without respect of person. The wanderer goes on to suggest that the minister “join” him in order to greatly benefit from this in the future, considering that he knows how to connect words and repair the harm they cause, i. e. he can change the bad thoughts which arise from corrupt words back into good thoughts. His obscure “job description” is put to the test as the minister is calumniated by other courtiers. Three men persuade the king that this minister plots against him and suggest the following trap to lure the minister: the king should tell him he is about to renounce the world and take up (literally “return to”) the religion of the ascetics and their faith and he shall notice that the minister rejoices in this communication. It should be noted that these villains make use of the words of the sages in their direct speech before the king¹. The king sends for the minister and presents his thoughts using the language of one at least idiomatically acquainted with “the” religion: he knows that he will be judged by the Judge, adding the formula “blessed be He”, he knows that the body goes down to the Sheol while the soul rises to the heavens, and that his royal life up to this point can be compared to a cloak he is about to take off. Only now does the minister’s evident joy and words reveal his faith, he praises God for letting the king find good counsel and see Him in a vision. The king speechless anger shows, so that the minister goes back to his palace low spirited and wondering what could have provoked the king’s reaction. After some time he remembers the promise of the “word flicker” and sends for him. The latter knows already that something related to the king is the matter and is willing to help. The minister recounts what has happened to his guest, who seems to know the content of the blasphemy and therefore suggests a trick to thwart the king’s strategy, so that damage apparently caused by words can be repaired. The word flicker’s strategy, however, does not consist only in having the minister reformulate what he has said before the king, but also in letting him act in a specific way. On the following morning the minister takes off his usual garments, puts on those of the

1 See *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 43-44.

ascetics, cuts his hair, goes to the king looking like a poor man, and insists on following his steps in renouncing the world. The minister is told by his guest the exact words he is supposed to say before the king. Once reconciled with his dear minister, the king lets the slanderers be judged harshly. A further measure the king implements is, ironically enough, to banish all ascetics from his kingdom.

This episode¹, a variation of which is the very well-known first *exemplo* in Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor* ("De lo que contescio a un rey con su privado"), does not deal, as was anticipated above with proper ascetics, but with two men, who, following the advice of others, just pretend to want to adhere to the ascetic ideal. The episode is, moreover, to a certain extent problematic, since it raises a number of questions without answering them. To name but a few: is the wanderer an ascetic? How does he realize that the minister is a kindred spirit, calling him "faithful man" and "honest man"? What is especially righteous about the minister's actions? At least in the first part of the episode probably the fact that he takes home an apparently destitute man and lets him share his meals, but then this man has promised to be of use in the future.

If we compare the minister with the courtiers who slander him, his actions depict him as less consistent in his convictions than the latter who just seem to want to get rid of him. On the one hand, he is sincerely

1 To a certain extent this episode can be regarded as a story within the story. See: H. Haferland and M. Mecklenburg, *Erzählungen in Erzählungen: Phänomene der Narration in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Munich, Fink, 1996, p. 17, who point out the problematic status of "eingelegte Erzählungen" ("inserted stories") as stories within stories: "Eingebettete Erzählungen haben einen anderen narrativen Status als eingelegte Erzählungen, die allein der Erzähler verantwortet, ohne sie einer handelnden Figur oder einem Bildträger zu überantworten [...]. Solche Einlagen, die in der Geschichte des Erzählens eingebettete Erzählungen ablösen können, lassen sich nur bedingt als Erzählungen in Erzählungen behandeln, wohl aber Seitenerzählungen, die Parallelhandlungen oder gar unabhängige, nur durch thematischen Bezug korrelierte Handlungen einschalten. Als Erzählungen in Erzählungen bemessen sie sich allein an ihrer Selbständigkeit innerhalb der Haupte Erzählung." ["Embedded narratives have a different narrative status from inserted narratives for which the narrator alone assumes responsibility without handing them over to an acting character or image-bearing object [...]. Such insertions, which can, in the history of narration, displace embedded narratives, can be treated as narratives within narratives only in very limited terms – unlike, surely, subsidiary narratives which introduce parallel plots or even independent plots that are linked only by thematic reference. Their status as narratives within a narrative is determined only by their independence within the main narrative." Translation by A. Matthews, *The Kaiserchronik: A Medieval Narrative*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 121].

happy when he hears that the king has decided to give up his life in the world in order to become an adept of the religion of the ascetics. But we cannot be sure that he himself has ever had this plan for himself. He is almost forced to play the part of one who wants to renounce the world in order to be able to reconcile himself with the king. There is no evident anagnorisis moment, i. e. neither does the king reveal that he has played a role suggested by the slanderers, nor does the minister confess that he himself has been advised on how to proceed. Once they reconcile themselves, however, the old *ordo* returns to the court, but the king's furor against the religion has grown, so that the repairing effect of the word flicker's counsel has only helped the minister, not the ascetics who dwell in the king's land. The narrator explains at the end of the chapter that this measure of the king still has consequences, for there are few "men of the religion and asceticism in those regions." (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 55)

THE SECOND ASCETIC AND HIS TALES ABOUT ASCETICISM

Before the master ascetic makes his appearance, the prince has been informed by one of the courtiers in charge of taking care of him about the ascetics and the reason why they were forced to leave his father's lands (chapter 6). The man, solely described by his speech, even praises these men in his account:

I knew that in days past there were pious men who were called ascetics. They rebelled against this changing world and took up a grand and awesome world. They had a wonderful eloquence, an excellent wisdom, and an unblemished soul. Their faith is perfect and their spirit pure. Their hands are dear and their feet straight. I do not know what happened to them, since people hate their actions, their ways, and their deeds, and the king despises them. He has ordered to cast them out of his land and to burn and eliminate those who stay until their name is annihilated from the land. And I myself don't know a single one. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 66-67)

The king's plan to annihilate the ascetics' name is bound to fail, for his own son longs to be acquainted with them and their teaching, which becomes possible once the master ascetic makes his way into the palace.

Ascetics are present, though not called by their name, in the first of the embedded tales the master ascetic tells, The Messenger of Death. Here, the king is able to recognise them in two barefoot men dressed

in rags as messengers of God and he alights from his horse to greet them, an action slanderers use against him before the king's brother. The chapter illustrates what its heading had advanced, 'Honour human beings according to their wisdom, not according to their dress or appearance.' (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 73)

In chapter 12 the prince asks the ascetic about his eating habits and he is told the gruesome story of The King who ate one of his Sons¹: accompanied by his family a king flees his enemies, but these can besiege him until the family doesn't have anything to eat and one of the children starves to death and has to be thrown in the river. The king speaks to his wife saying: "See, our hope is lost. The only things left to us are our corpses. Therefore it is better some of us die and some of us stay alive, than that all of us die. My advice is that we take one of our sons for our provision, so that God sees our distress." (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 93) The wife complains about them not having rich delicate food to help themselves to. She even suggests they surrender, in order to be able to eat properly instead of eating their son. But her husband convinces her that she is wrong, he quotes the alleged answer of Job when he was asked after the greatest pain he had to endure and he replied "the vengeance of enemies". Only the words following the story, which does not explicitly end with the wife giving in as in the Ismaili *Kitab Bilawhar*, make it clear how this story exemplifies the meaning of food and drink for ascetics. The master compares eating abundant food, which is neither necessary nor healthy, with eating what the body needs to be satiated, and concludes that only the latter is sweet to the palate. Less sweet, in any case, is the motif of cannibalism in the embedded narrative corresponding to this exemplary attitude towards nutrition.

1 The story is told in answer to the same question in the Ismaili *Kitab Bilawhar*. The narrative is followed here by the interpretive question, missing in the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, "And you, oh prince, what do you think of this king? How did he eat? Like a dog who even asks for more or like someone who is forced to do it and does it reluctantly?" (transl. after Gimaret, *Le Livre*, p. 94). The Western tradition does not include this story. In the Greek-Byzantine version Barlaam simply describes the eating habits of hermits explaining their meaning: "Thus, in pursuit of virtue, they utterly denied themselves all fleshly comfort and repose, submitting to a diet of uncooked herbs and worts, or acorns, or hard dry bread, not merely saying good-bye to delights in their quality, but, in very excess of temperance, extending their zeal to limit even the quantity of enjoyment." Quoted after [John Damascene] *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, with an English translation by G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingly, introduction by D. M. Lang. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 175.

But probably one of the most interesting of the embedded stories told by the master ascetic, one which deals quite explicitly with the transmission of wisdom, is that of The King and his Vizier in chapter 16 (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 112-122) told in reply to the prince's question whether among those around his father there be no one capable of rescuing him from his idolatry and ignorance. The first part of the story is a preamble with a description of the two protagonists: the smart but idolatrous king who has no secrets with his vizier and the latter, secretly a wise and religious man, i. e. a lover of "wisdom and her proverbs", who holds precisely this secret from the king. His close friends warn him not to irritate the king trying to make him aware of the error of idolatry and to keep a reasonable distance from him, a piece of advice confirmed with the words of both the sages and the poet. The narrator anticipates, however, that these sayings do not apply in the case of this particular king: the king is depicted in too positive terms so that the reader and listener can expect that he will be rescued from ignorance.

The plot: once during a sleepless night the king goes with his vizier for a stroll in order to get to know what common people living in the town do when they rest. Their attention is called by a shining coming from the midst of a dunghill. On coming near they realize that within this dunghill a couple has made their abode in a sort of cave and look, in spite of the circumstances, extremely happy. The peeping king cannot believe his eyes and ears, for the poor man and woman not only live among dung, but feed on what they find in the dunghill, and even sing, dance, rejoice, and speak to each other poetic words of praise. There comes a point when the narrator applies the *topos* of inexpressibility to the description of the scene in the couple's life: "there was so much laughter and happiness, joy, and gaiety in them, that much can't even be measured or described" (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 115). Seeing the king's amazement as a positive reaction to what they have experienced, the vizier seizes the occasion and decides to approach the subject of the king's flaw in the matter of faith. His plan is to expound at times more straightforward, and at times more allusively. He begins in the latter manner, so that the king demands more clarity, realizing he is being spoken to in the form of an allegory – "Explain your allegory and I shall listen." The vizier continues to expound more explicitly comparing two contemplating agents (a) the king and himself, and b) they who know

the Eternal Kingdom) with two contemplated objects (a) the poor couple and b) the king and the vizier): The wealth and status of the king and the vizier, the vizier argues, resemble in the eyes of those who know the Eternal Kingdom the poverty and status of the couple in the cave as perceived by the king and the vizier. (He counts himself among the “ignorant” of the Eternal Kingdom, it seems, as a way of gaining the king’s sympathy. If he were totally ignorant of that kingdom, however, he would not be able to convey to the king the wisdom the way he is actually doing at the moment.) In other words, wealth and status equal extreme poverty. In order to illustrate his comparison, the vizier tells two short stories, two sages micro-stories introduced with the formula “And the sages told already...”, dealing with the vanity and transitoriness of wealth and achievements in this world:

The sages told that a man stood before the king, was punished on the basis of slander, and sentenced to death. The man stood, raised his voice, and said, “I swear, king, by Him in whose hands you will be tomorrow, that you will be even more humiliated than me who am in your hands today, and that He can reward you better than you can reward me, for you are not judging me justly.” The king trembled at what he heard and released him.

They told that King David found in Ziklag the following word written on a king’s gravestone, “I am the king so-and-so, I ruled a thousand years, I laid waste a thousand countries, I destroyed a thousand encampments, and took a thousand fine princesses. And then I came here, where my bed is made of dust and ashes, above my head are trees and stones. To everyone who looks at me I say, ‘Don’t let time deceive you as it deceived me’.” (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 117)¹

These two third-narrative-level tales are not interpreted once they have been told, but are supposed to illustrate the point made before, namely that this world is only temporary, by just “speaking for themselves”. It should be noted that this is the case with most sages micro-stories in the work: they are told, but their words need not be deciphered as other tales, e. g. The King for a Year.

The king does not reflect on these tales, but goes back to the men acquainted with the Eternal Kingdom mentioned previously and asks his vizier who they are. The vizier defines them as “people of faith,

1 On the parallels of this story, both in Eastern and Western literature see Sadan, “Le mort qui confessa”, p. 250-253.

men of religion and asceticism”, who have “thoughts only for righteous deeds” (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 117). A third story is now told to illustrate the behaviour of people of faith and its meaning, The King and the Shepherd. We cannot analyse this tale in detail, but suffice it to say that it is yet another example of how a king comes to realize, after a short talk with someone of lower standing, that he is wrong. In this case, the shepherd refuses to accept an invitation to partake of the king’s meal on account of having previously accepted an invitation to fast by God.

After the king has heard this tale, which is followed by a short depiction of the Eternal Kingdom, he asks his vizier on what grounds he has withheld this information from him up to this moment. The vizier’s answer implies that the very status of a king is incompatible with leading a righteous life, for a king’s life is based on pleasure, blindness, and pride¹. However, the vizier seems to have perceived a change of attitude in the king after having observed the rejoicing poor couple in their most humble home.

The last part of the tale consists of two further passages comparing the present world with the world to come. The vizier uses his own images and words of the poet for the first depiction², but for the second, he quotes an allegory of the world by the sages and gives his own interpretation of it.

It is, however, the end of the story that especially calls our attention. We read that the vizier would go on expounding before the king until he had rescued him, transmitting

- 1 The vizier’s answer in the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* resembles that found in the Ismaili *Kitab Bilawhar*. Gimaret, *Le Livre*, p. 54, points out that there is a major difference between the Ismaili version and that of another extant Arabic source, that of Ibn Babuya: “Le roi demande au ministre: ‘Qu’est-ce qui t’a empêché de m’informer de cela (c’est-à-dire: du Royaume du Ciel) jusqu’aujourd’hui?’”. Dans B [Bombay print of the Ismaili version], le ministre répond en substance: “un roi n’est pas capable d’entendre la Sagesse, son pouvoir l’aveugle et le grise”. Dans IB [Ibn Babuya’s version], il répond: “Ce qui m’en a empêché, c’est le respect envers toi et le respect envers ton pouvoir.” The Western versions follow the vizier’s answer in the Greek-Byzantine text, which resembles that of Ibn Babuya, “It was not from negligence or indifference that I delayed to make this known unto thee, for it is true and beyond question, but ‘twas because I revered the excellency of thy majesty, lest thou mightest think me a meddler.” [John Damascene] *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, p. 235.
- 2 According to T. Calders the vizier would stop talking at this point – in her translation she closes the inverted commas which signalise direct speech –, so that the words of the poet appear to be spoken by the extradiegetic narrator. In my view, the vizier is the one quoting the poet at this point. I assume that both the words of the poet and the allegory of the world are spoken by the vizier.

[...] with his own hand every one of his secrets and questions. And this was his rescue from the pit, for he turned away from the bad way and joined the ascetics and the pious men of the religion for his entire life and went along the way of the good. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 122)

Is the happy end of this story one in which the king becomes an ascetic? What happened to the vizier? Did he take up the ascetic way of life or did he remain at court? The Western versions mention that the king led a pious life after this episode, but fail to inform what this life was exactly like. And, more importantly, they go back to the subject the tale was supposed to illustrate, namely, the prince's question, whether his father could be rescued from his ignorance. This is not the case with the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*. The story comes to an end and a chapter is closed. Contrary to what happens in the Western versions, the king will not even appear again on the diegetic level, so that there are no stratagems to try to persuade the prince to give up his faith, nor an eventual conversion¹.

The next chapter does not go back to the prince's father, but deals with the prince's desire to renounce the world and be with the ascetic the rest of his life. The latter tries to persuade the prince that he would not be able to cope with the hardships of this type of life, i. e. with a life as a wanderer, with little to eat and drink or to protect his body, without a roof, without a beast of burden, without any money. This is probably the only passage in the whole *Sefer ben ha-melekh* which depicts asceticism as if viewed from the perspective of someone other than an ascetic, on the one hand in negative terms, but on the other providing essential information about it, such as the fact that ascetics do not take up a permanent abode, but that they are constantly moving from one place to another².

By the end of the dialogue, the ascetic realizes that his teaching has been successful and that he can now take leave of the prince and go somewhere else where he can be of use. Once he has finished a job he must turn to a new task, he explains. But before he does so, he gives

1 The frame narrative could be said to resemble that of Don Juan Manuel's *Libro de los Estados*, considered a rather free Castilian adaption of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat of the fourteenth century. The frame narrative is there to provide a setting for the dialogue and need not be taken up again once the dialogue comes to an end. Incidentally, it has been argued that Don Juan Manuel could have used an Arabic source which has not been conserved. See: *Orígenes de la novela*. Vol. 1: *Influencia oriental. Libros de caballerías*, ed. M. Menéndez Pelayo and E. Sánchez Reyes, Madrid, 1943 [repr.], p. 141.

2 See *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 126-127.

the prince in chapter 30 extensive advice on how to be a just king, in times of war and in times of peace. Especially misogynistic is his advice concerning women. This chapter, the only one of its character in the whole *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, can be regarded as a piece of mirror of princes. The prince realizes the master ascetic expects from him that he assume his responsibility as king. Therefore, instead of following the ascetic, the prince asks him to stay with him at palace, promising to provide him with a room, a desk, a lamp, and a bed, and assuring him furthermore that he will be able to dedicate his life to God¹. The ascetic replies that this is not possible, for he is a servant of God. To illustrate the danger such a drastic change of life could involve for him, he tells two *comical* parables, curiously enough, given the earnestness of the issue: The Monkey turned Barber and The Weaver turned Acrobat:

The sages said already that the occupation in which a man grows, this is suitable for him to maintain, lest it happens to him what happened to the monkey. The prince asked, 'What was it like?' The ascetic answered, 'They told that a monkey watched a barber, swift at his work. He shaved himself while no one was with him. As soon as the barber went away the monkey came into his booth, took the razor with his right hand, and slid it across his neck and died. And the poet said,

'Tell the fool who is in a hurry at his work,
Without understanding and causing his own plagues,
In his foolishness not to change his occupation
For if he does there is a knife put to his throat.'

And the man who has one occupation today but tomorrow another, he will kill himself with his own hands, and it will happen to him what happened to the weaver.' The prince asked, 'What happened to him?' The ascetic answered, 'They told that a weaver was very poor and used to engage in his work. From it he earned a living for himself and for his family. One day a wedding canopy was set in his town for certain wealthy people. The sound of the wedding attracted jesters from everywhere, and the poor man watched them most preciously dressed and adorned, riding on horses and mules, handmaids and servants standing before them. Every time they would speak and tell something in their language, with their proverbs and allegories, all the people would rejoice in their company. And when they went to eat, the best of their food and bread was given them. Their share was by no means lacking, their portion was certainly rich. In his heart he exalted their principles and customs, noting how little their hard work and how much their

1 See *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 195.

pleasure was, and he strongly desired to be one of them. Among their general laughter and frivolity he noticed one of them who climbed up a fifty cubit high tower. From there he threw himself to the floor and stood up on his feet and walked away. All those who watched him were amazed for they had never before seen his like. It was so great in their eyes that they gave him presents. The weaver coveted them and loved them saying, 'That is really an excellent jest for which one needs neither further introduction nor the help of anyone in the world. So I, too, will do it. I will jump on my legs and they will give me presents like they gave to them.' The naive man climbed up the tower and threw himself down and fell on his head, broke his neck, and died. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 196-198)

As if confirming the common etymology of wisdom and wit with his choice of tales, the master ascetic is capable of using humour in order to transmit wisdom. This is not the only occasion in the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, but it is significant that precisely two of his last parables, intended to show how important it is to stick to the occupation one has learned are of comical character. His intention and interpretation closes the chapter and these are the last words in rhymed prose of the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*:

I just told you this parable to show you and make you understand that it is not suitable for any man to leave the occupation he has engaged in his whole life, which he knows, to exchange it for one he does not know, this he should not try to pursue. I have held this conviction since the days of my childhood and shall not give it up till my replacement comes. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 198)

CONCLUSION(S)

The best of horses needs whipping, the greatest hero needs a sword, and the wisest king needs an advisor. (*Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 45)

All through the work we find dialogue situations representing the transmission of wisdom by an ascetic or other sort of wise (lay) being –e. g. the vizier in *The King and his Vizier*, the bird in *The Gardener and the Bird*, the cockerel in *The Cockerel and the Nobleman* among others. The words quoted above are curiously enough not uttered by one of these wise beings, but by mischievous slanderers of a righteous minister of the king.

Wisdom is not presented as specific to any religion; in fact, the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* can be seen as devoid of religious dogmas. Transmission of a universalistic wisdom and admonition on the dangers of a decadent lifestyle, as Sharon L. Albert puts it, are the tasks which author, narrator, and several characters, but predominantly the master ascetic intend to fulfil within and with the work, i. e. in every possible narrative level.

Even if one can learn from anyone, as the ascetic explains, wisdom is ideally transmitted by sages and teachers¹, and the ascetic is fundamentally a teacher, this seems to be his main characteristic. More than what he looks like, more than what he eats, or with whom he chooses to live his life, what defines an ascetic in the *Sefer ben ha-melekh* is his ability to transmit wisdom, and building blocks of this wisdom are the parables, sayings, both in prose and verse form, he utters. Wisdom is transmitted by quoting the sages and the poet, but probably more efficiently by telling parables with which the listener or interlocutor can identify himself. This is confirmed on every narrative level, as well as in the paratexts preceding the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*.

The work confirms, however, that to a certain extent wisdom can be and is transmitted by several agents, that it is not the exclusivity of ascetics, even though the master ascetic is clearly the agent who tells the majority of parables (see appendix). But, as was already mentioned, not only the wise and the righteous, but also the villains², the idolatrous king, the prince before he has been taught by the ascetic, human and animal characters of metadiegetic narratives, they can all tell parables, quote the sages and the poet, and speak in verse, i. e. they use the language and the stylistic markers of the wise ascetics. Nevertheless, the *ubiquitousness* of such a “parabolical wisdom” does not prevent the reader or listener outside the diegetical world to distinguish among the tellers of parables and give more credit to the embedded tales told by the narrator and heroes of the text than to those a villain or a cockerel of a third narrative level tells.

Constanza CORDONI
Universität Wien

1 See *Sefer ben ha-melekh*, p. 169.

2 E. g. the slanderers of the minister in the episode of The Word Flicker.

APPENDIX

Index of parables in the *Sefer ben ha-melekh*

Each entry in this appendix contains the following information about the parables or embedded narratives: chapter, page according to Haberman's edition, Meisel's and Calders' translations, introductory formula(e), narrative instance, type of explicit interpretation (if there is one) i. e. preceding, within, or following the narrative, and third level narratives (i. e. told within the metadiegetic narratives). The corpus consists basically of three types of narratives, which for heuristic purposes can be denominated: regular stories in past tense (e. g. The Three Friends), sages' micro-stories (saying of the sages in a narrative frame, e. g. The Sage and a Woman), and parables (embedded narrative generally told in present and describing a general phenomenon, e. g. The Gardener and his Garden).

"The Sage and his Friend", chapter 5 (Haberman: p. 52, Meisel: p. 94-95, Calders: p. 100-101); introductory formula: "I knew that what I heard about a sage was true"; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the king.

"Alexander and the Youth", chapter 6 (Haberman: p. 56-57, Meisel: p. 101-102, Calders: p. 105-106); introductory formula: "the sages recalled that..."; told by the extradiegetic narrator.

"The Answer of Joseph the righteous", chapter 6 (Haberman: p. 60-61, Meisel: p. 109-110, Calders: 109); introductory formula: "You should know, my lord, that I heard that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the prince.

"The Messenger of Death and the Four Caskets", chapter 8 (Haberman: p. 73-79, Meisel: p. 130-140, Calders: p. 119-124); single introductory formula: "You behaved with me, chosen prince, like..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the nazir; the allegorical interpretation is interwoven with the tale.

"The Bird and the Fishing Rod", chapter 9 (Haberman: p. 81, Meisel: p. 142-143, Calders: p. 126); double introductory formula: a) "as it happened to...", b) "they said that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; an anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale.

"The Sower", chapter 10 (Haberman: p. 83-85, Meisel: p. 145-148, Calders: p. 128-129); single introductory formula: "You should know that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; the allegorical interpretation is interwoven with the tale.

- "The three Friends", chapter 11 (Haberman: p. 86-91, Meisel: p. 149-157, Calders: p. 131-135); single introductory formula: "You should know that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical interpretation follows the tale.
- "The fugitive King and his starving Family", chapter 12 (Haberman: p. 92-95, Meisel: p. 159-162, Calders: p. 137-139); double introductory formula: a) "as it happened to...", b) "they said that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale and interpretive commentary follows it as well.
- "The Man and the Litter", chapter 12 (Haberman: p. 95, Meisel suppressed this tale, see. p. 162, footnote, Calders: p. 139-140); introductory formula: "the sages said that"; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.
- "Joseph the righteous", chapter 12 (Haberman: p. 95-96, Meisel: p. 163, Calders: p. 140); introductory formula: "and they also said"; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.
- "The King for a Year", chapter 13, (Haberman: p. 97-100, Meisel: p. 164-168, Calders: p. 141-144); single introductory formula: "I heard that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical interpretation follows the tale.
- "The Physician and his Treatment", chapter 14 (Haberman: p. 104, Meisel: p. 172-173, Calders: p. 146-147); single introductory formula: "You should know that..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical interpretation follows the parable told in present¹.
- "The Sun of Wisdom", chapter 15 (Haberman: p. 108, Meisel: p. 177-178, Calders: p. 149-150); introductory formula: "Because..."²; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.
- "The King and his Vizier", chapter 16 (Haberman: p. 112-122, Meisel: p. 182-199, Calders: p. 155-163); double introductory formula: a) "as it happened to...", b) "they told about..."; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale; the vizier himself is (intra-intradiegetic) narrator of stories (meta-metadiegetic narratives), ("The Judgement", "David and the

1 To be precise, the parable uses the *imperfect*, unlike most of the embedded tales which use the perfect tense or preterite. The piece could be seen as a *similitudo*, where the hypothetical replaces the epic character of the narrative. In Rüdiger Zymner's terminology this would be termed "Gleichnis", i. e. an hypothetical fiction. See: art. "Gleichnis" in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, Vol. 1, ed. Klaus Weimar, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 2007 (repr.), p. 724-727. Unless otherwise stated the narratives are told in the past tense.

2 Told in direct answer to question posed by the prince; like the physician and his treatment we have here a simile, which has less to do with the sun but rather with the human beings sight.

Gravestone of Ziklag” and “The King and the Shepherd” and an allegory of the present world and the Eternal World (Haberman: p. 117-118 and 121-122).

“The Dog and the Two Weddings”, chapter 17 (Haberman: p. 124-125, Meisel: p. 202-204, Calders: p. 166-167); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale.

“The rich young Man and the poor Maiden”, chapter 18 (Haberman: p. 128-135, Meisel: p. 208-220, Calders: p. 169-172); double introductory formula a) “you resemble in your behaviour towards me, prince, the story of...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale; the youth of the metadiegetic story tells himself a story to his future father in law, the old man, “The spoilt Prince” (Haberman: p. 132-134; double introduction).

“The Gardener and his Garden”, chapter 19 (Haberman: p. 138, Meisel: p. 222-223, Calders: p. 173); single introductory formula: “You see that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical application follows the parable told in present.

“The Bird Qaras”¹, chapter 19 (Haberman: p. 139, Meisel: p. 224, Calders: p. 174); single introductory formula: “You should know that”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical application follows the parable told in present.

“The Language between Animals and Human Beings”, chapter 19 (Haberman: p. 139-140, Meisel: p. 225-226, Calders: p. 174); double introductory formula: a) “I shall tell you a parable...”, b) “Don’t you see that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; allegorical application follows the parable told in present.

“Alexander’s Speech”, chapter 20 (Haberman: p. 144, Meisel: p. 230-231, Calders: p. 179); single introductory formula: “And the sages said”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.

“The Man and the Doctor”, chapter 20 (Haberman: p. 144-145, Meisel: p. 231-232, Calders: p. 179); single introductory formula: “and the sages said”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.

“The Gardener and the Bird”, chapter 21 (Haberman: p. 146-151, Meisel: p. 234-240, Calders: p. 181-185); double introductory formula: a) “Your people and their their idolatry resemble...”, b) “they said that...”; told by

1 The name of the bird is also spelt *karshun* in transliteration. Meisel, p. 191 n. 2, points out that, according to Steinschneider, the word “qara”(?) denotes a bird of the name Karsun listed in Freytag’s Arabic lexicon.

an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; commenting interpretation follows the story; the bird in the metadiegetic narrative is itself narrator of the story of her ancestors.

- “The Work and its Creator”, chapter 22 (Haberman: p. 152, Meisel: p. 242, Calders: p. 187); single introductory formula: “Don’t you know that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; interpretation follows the simile.
- “The Philosopher”, chapter 22 (Haberman: p. 153, Meisel: p. 243, Calders: p. 188); single introductory formula: “and the sages told that...”; told by intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The Dogs and the Carrion”, chapter 23 (Haberman: p. 157-158, Meisel: p. 249-250, Calders: p. 192); single introductory formula: “They told that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic, allegorical application follows the story.
- “The angry King and the clever Servant”, chapter 24 (Haberman: p. 160-161, Meisel: p. 253-254, Calders: p. 196-197); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale.
- “The Cockerel and the Nobleman”, chapter 24 (Haberman: p. 161-165, Meisel: p. 255-259, Calders: p. 197-199); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes and interpretive commentary follows the story.
- “The Four Sayings of Four Kings”, chapter 26 (Haberman: p. 169-170, Meisel p. 265, Calders: p. 203-204); single introductory formula: “they said that...”; told by intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story followed by another sages micro-story.
- “A Father’s Admonition to his Son”, chapter 26 (Haberman: p. 170, Meisel: p. 265, Calders: p. 204); no introductory formula; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The old Judge”, chapter 26 (Haberman: p. 174, Meisel: p. 272, Calders: p. 207); single introductory formula: “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The Lord and the Thieves”, chapter 27 (Haberman: p. 176-178, Meisel: p. 274-276, Calders: 209-210); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the tale.
- “The King and his dying Teacher”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 189-190, Meisel: p. 291-292, Calders: p. 221); single introductory formula: “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The King who was loved by his whole People”, chapter 30 (Haberman:

- p. 190, Meisel: p. 292, Calders: p. 221); no introductory formula; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The Bear and the Pig”, chapter 30 (Haberman p. 191, Meisel: p. 293-294, Calders: p. 222); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the story.
- “The Prince who saw a Hair on his Guest’s Plate”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 192, Meisel: p. 295, Calders: p. 222-223); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; anticipatory interpretation precedes the story.
- “A Sage’s Will for his Sons”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 192, Meisel omits it, Calders: p. 223); single introductory formula: “Always have present between your eyes...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “A Sage’s Command to his Sons”, chapter 30 (Haberman p. 193, Meisel: p. 296, Calders: p. 223); no introductory formula; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “A Sage and a Woman”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 193, Meisel: p. 297, Calders: p. 224); no introductory formula; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “A Sage and a Hunter”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 193, Meisel: p. 297, Calders: p. 224); no introductory formula; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; sages micro-story.
- “The Woman and the Doll”, chapter 30 (Haberman: p. 193-195, Meisel omits the story, Calders: p. 224-225); single introductory formula: “the sages recalled that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic.
- “The Monkey turned Barber”, chapter 31 (Haberman: p. 196-197, Meisel: p. 300, Calders: p. 227-228); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator; anticipatory interpretation precedes the story.
- “The Weaver turned Acrobat”, chapter 31 (Haberman: p. 197-198, Meisel: p. 301-302, Calders: p. 228); double introductory formula: a) “as it happened to...”, b) “they said that...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; commenting interpretation follows the story.
- “The Wanderer”, chapter 35 (Haberman: p. 210, Meisel: p. 309-310, Calders: p. 238); single introductory formula: “As...”; told by an intradiegetic narrator, the ascetic; interpretation follows the parable told in present.